BLESS THE BEASTS AND THE CHILDREN
Numbers 22
May 15, 1983

John M. Buchanan
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

The setting we need to create is so old, perhaps 3500 years, it is impossible totally to reconstruct. But with the help of archeology, history, and a few maps, some clarity emerges. The year was 1500 BC. The semitic tribe called Hebrews was on the march: from a generation of captivity in Egypt, through decades of meandering in the dry wilderness of the Sinai pennisula, to the land of Palestine, inhabited by people called Cannanite who lived in city states with names like Moab, Jericho. The Hebrew tribes were devastatingly successful: motivated by an intense religious certainty that the land was theirs, hardened by the discipline of the desert, the armies of the children of Israel seemed invincible. Their reputation preceded them: the kings of the Cannanite city states lived in mortal terror of the day when the horizon clouded with dust from the advancing Israelite army.

It was on just such a day that Balak, King of Moab, looked out across the plains on the far side of the Jordan River, near the city of Jericho and saw it. They had come overnight. Having defeated the neighboring Ammorites, they were camped, preparing obviously, to advance on the next objective - Moab, Balak's private domain. So Balak gathered his court and uttered one of the more graphic observations in the Bible: "This horde will now lick up all that is round about us, as the ox licks up the grass of the field."

Obviously emergency measures were in order. The strategy was to bring in reinforcements, divine if possible. Balak sent a delegation to a mysterious but highly regarded shaman by the name of Balaam, to hire him to lay a curse on the Israelite horde. Balaam refuses the offer, the delegation returns to Balak with the reply, Balak renews the invitation, ups the ante, sends a second delegation to Balaam, this time with an offer he cannot turn down. In the meantime God is having a cunning conversation with Balaam in his dreams. The text today begins on the morning when Balaam sets out with the Moabite delegation, heading North, for a meeting with Balak to discuss the matter further.

One further word: every time I heard this story as a youngster I wanted to laugh: not only at the language, but at the content. It has always seemed to me a funny story, but I kept my laughter to myself because it always seemed more appropriate to be grim about the Bible. I know better now. I have learned that the people who first told it, howled at it. It was hilarious. It is a wonderful example of oriental folk-humor. That is not to say that it is not a serious story, nor that it is not the vehicle of God's word to us - only that it is funny, and that you don't have to endure the pain of internalizing a snicker or chuckle if you feel one coming on.

Hear now the word of God: So Balaam rose in the morning, and saddled his ass, and went with the princes of Moab. But God's anger was kindled because he went; and the angel of the Lord took his stand in the way as his adversary. Now he was riding on the ass, and his two servants were with him. And the ass saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road, with a drawn sword in his hand; and the ass turned aside out of the road, and went into the field; and Balaam struck the ass, to turn her into the road. Then the angel of the Lord stood in a narrow path between the vineyards, with a wall on either side. And when the ass saw the angel of the Lord, she pushed against the wall, and pressed Balaam's foot against the wall; so he struck her again. Then the angel of the Lord went ahead, and stood in a narrow place, where there was no way to turn either to the right or to the left. When the ass saw the angel of the Lord, she lay down under Balaam; and Balaam's anger was kindled, and he struck the ass with his staff. Then the Lord opened the mouth of the ass, and she said to Balaam, "What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?" and Balaam said to the ass, "Because you have made sport of me.

whatever he writes. So I read anxiously what Sittler, ~~in his late 70's~~, ~~world-class thinker~~, had to say to new seminary graduates. He posed the question of how Christianity gets transmitted from one person to another, one generation to the next. Listen to how he put it - "As I tried to discern the tangled history of my own coming to Christian faith...My whole life has been haunted by the reality of Jesus...I find that, despite all the scholarship which has taken place between my seminary days and this moment, there is no abatement in the power of this haunting allure of the figure of Jesus." (Trinity Review, Fall 1982, p. 34)

Sittler told how he had been on a program with Krister Stendahl, one of the leading New Testament scholars in the world, and how a layman from Iowa had gotten up during the question and answer period and asked very simply, "Professor Stendahl, how did you get 'hooked' on this stuff?" Again, let's allow Sittler to tell it: "Now we all leaned back and expected from Stendahl a fairly long-haired description of the historical, conceptual, philosophical path by which many of us came, and it was a great moment when Stendahl said, 'My family and I were not church people at all and the only way I could rebel against the mores of my family was to go to church! And when I got to church, within six months, I fell in love with Jesus.'" (p. 33/34)

Even those intellectuals who perceive and discern and comprehend so much more than the rest of us begin here, with the elemental simplicity of the man. Or perhaps it is because they discern so much that they can see the centrality of the man..."I fell in love with Jesus."

The question is posed first in the lesson for the day, by Jesus himself. "Do you love me, Peter?" The situation is loaded with dramatic intensity. On the night Jesus was arrested and subjected to the humiliation of a religious trial before Caiaphas, Peter had followed at a safe distance into the courtyard of the high priest's residence. It was there, warming himself at the fire, that Peter had been challenged. "You are one of them!" a young woman had said. And Peter, startled, frightened, had denied it. Three times it happened that night and each time Peter denied knowing Jesus, punctuating his third denial with an obscenity. It is one of the more poignantly human stories in the Gospel narrative, and it concludes powerfully with the cock crowing and Jesus' eyes meeting Peter's and Peter weeping bitterly, devastated by his own humanness.

What occurred next, for Peter, is unclear. Jesus was crucified on a Friday. If the disciples were around, most of them at least, kept a discreet distance. On the first day of the week,, Easter Sunday, Peter was one of the first to discover the empty tomb. And then there occurred a series of mysterious resurrection appearances. Some time later Peter and the others are fishing in the early morning when the risen Christ appears on the shore. They eat breakfast together and ~~the structure of the text suggests that~~ the stage is set for the conclusion of the matter of Peter's denial.

And surely part of it is that the innocence, the uncluttered gaze of Balaam's beast - is something like that state of childlikeness which Jesus forever made important and memorable. Surely part of this funny but surprisingly wise old story is that the child-like donkey sees what the high-priced religious practitioner cannot see. And that, I would submit, is a very provocative topic.

As if on cue, having chosen this text a long time ago, the New York Times Magazine editors were kind enough last Sunday to publish a major feature article, "The Loss of Childhood". The author, Marie Winn, contends on the basis of hundreds of interviews with fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh graders, that we have undergone fundamental and major change in our society in the very definition of childhood. She discusses the ease with which young ones are able to talk about sex, drugs and pornography. The greatest change, however, is not the loss of innocence but in our basic attitudes toward children. "Where parents once felt obliged to shelter their children from life's vicissitudes, today great numbers of them have come to operate according to a new belief: that children must be exposed early to adult exprience in order to survive in an increasingly uncontrollable world. The Age of Protection has ended. An Age of Preparation has set in. And children have suffered a loss." (NYT Magazine, 5/8/83, p. 18) Marie Winn acknowledges that there is no turning back to simpler times, that access to television alone guarantees a level of exposure to and knowledgeability about adult sexuality, unheard of when today's adults were growing up. What is needed is the recovery of the freedom and privilege for children to be children, to enjoy the luxury of uncomplicated innocence.

Bruno Bettleheim agrees. In The Uses of Enchantment, Bettleheim laments that in education we teach reading skills without meaning and without the stimulation of imagination. Childhood is the time for the imagination to be exercised and developed in order that the adult will later see better, more wholly, more accurately. Why is it that the professional religionist couldn't see as clearly as the donkey? Why is it that you and I often miss the angel standing in the road - if not because we have lost some capacity to see angels?

It is not peculiar to our life style alone. C. S. Lewis, in his autobiography, writes about his experience in an English public school (a private boarding school, in our parlance)..."Spiritually speaking, the deadly thing was that school life was a life almost wholly dominated by the social struggle; to get on, to arrive, or having reached the top, to remain there, was the absorbing preoccupation...It would perhaps, not be too much to say that in some boys' lives everything was calculated to the great end of advancement. For this games were played; for this clothes, friends, amusements, and vices were chosen." (Surprised by Joy, p. 108)

Those privileged to be dealing with small children, and the rest of us whose responsibility it is to give support to the process, need to learn again the necessity, not of preparing children to cope with hard realities, but of simply being chidlren. Because if they are not children, there will be a great emptiness later, an incapacity, a poverty which, the more one thinks about it, is basically spiritual or theological poverty.

"Unless you turn and become like children," Jesus said, "You will never enter the kingdom of heaven." He did not say, "Unless you act childishly..." Immaturity is not the goal. It is to become like children. It is a reminder that from its beginnings, in the nativity story, Christianity depends on the humble, the meek, the unlikely, the weak, for its wisdom. Shepherds recognize the baby out back while important, educated, powerful people swap stories at the hotel bar. From the beginning...very modest people are important in the Christian story, and one learns, after awhile, not to stop listening when children or fishermen or outcasts speak. In the New Testament, more often than not, they say the words worth hearing. From the beginning Christian faith celebrates the innocent, the small, the meek.

Hans Kung somewhere quips that the list of great people who love Jesus but want nothing to do with the church would be long and distinguished indeed. And everyone on it has missed the point. You can't love Jesus without feeding the sheep, and that gets you mixed up with other folk and before you know it you're in church.

I think Peter was in love with Jesus because he had seen Jesus live like that. Even as Jesus was pulling it out of him I believe Peter was recalling all those instances when love became visible, tangible, physical: when Jesus, moved by compassion had healed his own mother-in-law; when he gently touched little children; and ate with unclean street people; and in hot anger overturned tables and drove moneychangers from the temple; and when in awful majesty at the end knelt in front of each of them and washed their feet.

More than any of them I see in Peter my own attraction to the power of that kind of love. The allure has always been a love which has integrity and authenticity and strength about it. But there is a sense in which that strength also repels. How else can we account for the prissy Jesus of much ecclesiastical art? Robert Clyde Johnson's classic comment was that the Jesus of modern Protestantism is inclined to be "velvety" - that in modern hands the Jesus of the New Testament has a "soft streak" in his personality when, in fact, there is a profound strength which some found - and find - frightening.

Frederick Nitzsche, certainly no friend of the faith, saw this clearly in Jesus. A character in one of his novels says about Jesus, "He had to die: he looked with eyes that beheld everything - he beheld man's depths and dregs, all his hidden ignominy and ugliness." (Thus Spoke Zarathustra, in Johnson, "The Meaning of Christ", p. 33)

The allure of Jesus is a strength of a love that can also repel. After all, falling in love is very risky business. To be in love is somehow to be more alive - and that can be frightening. To be in love with one person is to love humanity more: it is to experience more, sense more, care more and hurt more. If you do not want that, if you do not want your life changed, it is better not to get close to Jesus. The allure, finally, is that he defines our humanity better than anybody else. Better than anyone he shows us what human life can be and therefore what our own potential is.

Sittler confessed to the seminary graduates, "This grave man with all the pathos and the magnificence of his life must not be betrayed. I must not talk nonsense about this man, I must not make jokes about him. I must not trivialize moralistically this awesome figure."